



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

SHAKESPEARE AS AN ACTOR*

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

It is one of the most curious coincidences of literary history that the two greatest dramatists of modern times, Shakespeare and Molière, should have begun their connection with the theater by going on the stage as actors, without having at first (so far as we can guess) any intention of becoming playwrights. After having acquired practical experience as performers both of them ventured modestly into dramatic authorship, starting in the most unpretending fashion by adapting the popular pieces of older contemporaries, and then essaying themselves in imitation of the more successful playwrights of the time. At first it was only tentatively that they developed their own individuality and revealed their own originality after continual practice had given them a more assured skill. But to the very end of their careers in the theater they continued to act; Shakespeare ceased to appear on the stage only when he left London and retired to Stratford to live the life of a country gentleman, and Molière was stricken fatally while taking part in the fourth performance of his last play.

Molière certainly, and quite possibly Shakespeare also, was better known to the playgoers of his own day as an actor than as an author. Molière was the foremost comedian of his day, and there is no dispute about his supremacy as an impersonator of humorous characters. Indeed, his enemies were wont to praise his acting and to disparage his writing. They affected to dismiss his plays as poor things in themselves, owing the most of their undeniable success to the brilliancy of the author's own performance of the chief parts. As actor, as author, and as manager Molière was the center of his company. Can as much be said

* Read before the American Academy of Arts and Letters at Philadelphia, January 26, 1912.

of Shakespeare? Great as Molière is as a dramatist, we cannot but feel that Shakespeare is still greater. When we note that Molière was pre-eminent among the players of his age in France we naturally wonder whether Shakespeare was also foremost among the performers of his time in England. Molière is the master of modern comedy, and it was by the impersonation of his own comic characters that he won his widest popularity with the playgoers of Paris. Shakespeare is the mightiest of tragic authors. Was he also the chief of the tragedians who held spellbound the gallants and the groundlings thronging to the London theaters in the spacious days of Elizabeth?

That the leader of English playwrights was also the leader of English actors is what we would like to believe in our natural desire to give to him that hath. This desire has led Mr. Sydney Lee to remark that when the company of the Globe accepted the royal summons to appear before the Queen at Christmas, 1594, Shakespeare was then "supported by actors of the highest eminence in their generation." And yet Mr. Lee is frank in expressing his own opinion that the great dramatist "was never to win the laurels of a great actor." He honestly admits that Shakespeare's "histrionic fame had not progressed at the same rate as his literary repute"; and he informs us that when the officials of the court invited the company to perform before Elizabeth, "directions were given that the greatest of the tragic actors of the day, Richard Burbage, and the greatest of the comic actors, William Kemp, were to bear the young actor company." And he adds that "with neither of these was Shakespeare's histrionic position then, or at any time, comparable," since "for years they were leaders of the acting profession."

This forces us to the conclusion that in his pardonable longing to glorify Shakespeare, Mr. Lee has been led into giving us a wrong impression. The Queen did not summon Shakespeare to appear before her; she summoned her whole company, to which Shakespeare belonged; and almost certainly it was Burbage and Kemp whom she wanted to see on the stage rather than Shakespeare. Burbage and Kemp were the chief ornaments of the company, and although Shakespeare was also a member, his position in the ranks of the company does not afford any warrant for the assumption that Elizabeth gave any special thought to him as

an actor. What she was desirous of witnessing was a series of performances by a famous company of which Burbage and Kemp were the most famous members. And in this series of performances at Court it was Shakespeare who supported Burbage and Kemp. It must be noted also that we do not know the programme of those performances at Court in the last week of 1594, and we are left in doubt whether Shakespeare was the author of any one of the plays then presented. Perhaps it is as well to point out further that he had up to that time produced no one of the major masterpieces on which his fame as a dramatist now rests securely.

While Molière composed the chief character in almost every one of his plays for his own acting, Shakespeare wrote the chief serious parts in his pieces for Burbage and the chief comic parts for Kemp (until that highly dowered comedian left the stage). For himself he modestly reserved characters of less prominence; in fact, in many of his plays, perhaps even in a majority of them, it is difficult to discover any part which seems to be specially adjusted to his own capacity as an actor. It is well known that Burbage appeared as Hamlet while Shakespeare humbly contented himself with the subordinate part of the Ghost. Who the original Orlando may have been has not yet been ascertained, but tradition tells us that the author of "As You Like It" impersonated Adam, the faithful old servitor of the hero. And in Ben Jonson's comedy of "Every Man in his Humor," which is believed to have been accepted for performance by the company owing to Shakespeare's influence, the part of the elder Knowell is said to have been taken by Shakespeare himself; and this seems quite probable, since it was a character which might very well be assumed by the performer of Adam and of the Ghost. These are the only three parts which tradition, not always trustworthy, has ascribed to Shakespeare as an actor. They belong, all three of them, to the line of business which is technically known as "old men." And this is the solid support of Mr. Lee's assertion that Shakespeare "ordinarily confined his efforts to old men of secondary rank."

Shakespeare, so Mr. Lee believes, was twenty-two when he left his wife and his three children at Stratford and trudged up to London to seek his fortune; and he was probably about twenty-five before his first piece was per-

formed. We have no information as to the means whereby he supported himself when he first arrived in the capital. He may have held horses at the door of the theater, as one tradition has it. Or he may have been able to attach himself at once to one of the half-dozen companies of actors in London, since he might have won friends among their members when one or another of them had appeared at Stratford in the summers immediately preceding his departure from his birthplace. Malone recorded a tradition "that his first office in the theater was that of prompter's attendant"—that is to say, call-boy, as the function is now styled. This may be a fact, of course, but it seems a little unlikely, since a man of twenty-two would be rather mature for such work, easily within the capacity of a lad of fourteen.

If Shakespeare left Stratford in 1586 he had already established himself in London as an actor six years later when he was twenty-eight. It was in 1592 that Chettle, the publisher, apologizing for having issued Greene's posthumous attack on Shakespeare, declared that he was "excellent in the quality he professes"—that is to say, excellent as an actor. This is high praise for so young a performer; but Chettle's testimony does not carry as much weight as it might, since he is here seeking by frank flattery to make amends for the attack he had previously published. Yet this praise may be taken as evidence that Shakespeare by that time had succeeded in achieving a recognized position on the stage as an actor. A tradition, first recorded in 1699, declared that he was "better poet than player."

Whether or not he began his career in the theater as a call-boy, he seems very early to have made choice of the "line of business" which he wished to play. He may have chosen it because he believed himself to be best fitted for parts of that kind; or he may have drifted into the performance of "old men" because there happened at that moment to be a vacancy in the company for a competent performer of these elderly characters. Although the impersonator of these parts is said to play "old men," the characters he is to assume are not all of them stricken in years, even if they are grave and sedate, lacking in the exuberant vivacity of youth. The Ghost, for example, and Adam also, are technically "old men." So are many of the dukes and other chiefs of state, personages of noble bearing and of emphatic dignity. That Shakespeare ap-

peared in characters of this type in more than one of his own plays is more than probable. In fact, one John Davies, of Hereford, recorded that Shakespeare "played some kingly parts in sport." Just what the words "in sport" may mean must be left to the imagination.

That these austere and lofty characters are known in the theater to-day as "old men" does not imply that the actor who has chosen this line of business is himself elderly. On the contrary, young actors have often deliberately decided to devote themselves to the performance of "old men." The late John Gilbert, for example, long connected with Wallack's Theater in New York and celebrated for his unrivaled rendering of Sir Peter Teazle and Sir Anthony Absolute, began to impersonate elderly characters before he was twenty. If Shakespeare played the Ghost and Adam, and if Gilbert also undertook these characters (as he did), then it is possible that certain of the other Shakespearian parts assumed by the American actor as the "old man" of his company may have been originally written by Shakespeare for his own acting. And this leads us to the plausible supposition that Shakespeare may have been the original performer of Ægeon in the "Comedy of Errors," of Leonato in "Much Ado About Nothing," Baptista in the "Taming of the Shrew," Friar Lawrence in "Romeo and Juliet," the King of France in "All's Well that Ends Well," the Duke in "Othello," the Duke in the "Merchant of Venice," and possibly also the Duke in "Measure for Measure" (although in this last somber comedy it may be that the part which Shakespeare performed was one or the other of the two Friars).

The ascription of these characters to Shakespeare as an actor may be only a hazardous guess, but it is a guess in accordance with the customs of the theatrical profession, which are as the laws of the Medes and Persians. It is a guess which is supported by all the known facts. A minute investigation of all his plays, by an expert in theatrical history and in histrionic tradition, would greatly increase the number of the parts which we have fair warrant for assuming to have been written by Shakespeare with an eye to his own acting.

The parts that have been here listed tentatively (and those that may be added to the catalogue) will be found to have certain general characteristics. They are all of them im-

portant and they are none of them prominent. The demands they severally made upon the actor who undertook them are not a few and not insignificant. For their proper representation most of them required a dignified presence, a courtly bearing, an air of authority, and a large measure of elocutionary skill. But the qualities these parts did not necessitate are equally significant. They called primarily for intelligence and only secondarily, if at all, for any large exhibition of emotion. Now, it is by the power of expressing passion at the great crises of existence and by the faculty of transmitting his feeling to his audience that the born actor is revealed. If he has not this native gift of communicable emotion, he can never be intrusted with the moving characters of a play. And apparently this native gift was denied to Shakespeare—who had so many others. An actor could acquit himself admirably in the Ghost and in Adam and in all the other “old men” which may have been performed by Shakespeare, he could have performed them to the entire satisfaction of the most critical spectators, without revealing the possession of the vital spark which illuminates the creative work of the truly great actor. In other words, these parts do not demand that the performer of them shall possess more than a moderate share of that mimetic faculty, that fullness of feeling, that amplitude of passion, which is the essential qualification for histrionic excellence.

To say this is not to suggest that Shakespeare had not a keen understanding of the fundamental principles of the art of acting. Such an understanding was his beyond all question, since that is a matter of the intelligence, of intellectual appreciation. To be assured of this we have only to recall the rehearsal of Bottom and his fellows, and to read again Hamlet’s pregnant advice to the Players. This understanding of the art of acting a playwright must always have or he will fail to get the utmost out of his actors. It is a condition precedent to his success as a writer of stage-plays; and it is possessed by every successful dramatist, by Racine and by Sheridan, by Sardou and by Bronson Howard, by Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones. The playwrights must know what can be done with every part in every play of theirs; and they can then help the performers to attain this. They know what can be done—but it does not follow that they can do it themselves. Their grasp of the princi-

ples of the art does not imply that they themselves could act any one of their best parts as they would wish to have this acted. They may be the most skilful of trainers, and yet lack the histrionic gift themselves.

And not merely dramatists, but stage-managers—"producers," as they are now styled—may have this faculty of directing and guiding and inspiring performers to achieve their utmost, without themselves being capable of doing as actors what they feel ought to be done. Any one at all familiar with stage history can cite men who have not been eminent as actors and yet who were able to suggest to others how to get the best out of themselves. It was little Bowes who taught the Fotheringay the effects which so impressed the youthful Pendennis. It was Samson, a withered comedian of limited range, but of keen artistic intelligence, who suggested to Rachel many of her broadest and boldest strokes in tragedy.

When we set Hamlet's speech to the Players over against the remarks which Molière made in his own person in the "*Impromptu of Versailles*," we cannot help seeing that these great dramatists were alike in abhorring artificiality in acting, in abominating violence, in detesting rant, and in relishing simplicity and apparent naturalness. Both of them inculcated the necessity of truth in the portrayal of character and of passion. Molière attained also to the highest levels of the histrionic art; Shakespeare did not, probably because he was lacking in some one of the several physical qualifications which the actor of dominating parts must have. Apparently he was a well-proportioned man, even if not positively good-looking. But his body may have been rebellious to his will, with the result that his gestures, however well intentioned, would be ineffective and even awkward. It may be that it was his voice which was at fault; and a noble organ of speech is almost indispensable to a great actor. In one of his papers on "*Actors and the Art of Acting*" (always full of insight into the principles of that little-understood art), George Henry Lewes considered this possibility:

"I dare say he declaimed finely, as far as rhythmic cadence and a nice accentuation went. But his non-success implies that his voice was intractable or limited in its range. Without a sympathetic voice, no declamation can be effective. The tones which stir us need not be musical, need not be pleasant, even, but they must have a penetrating, vibrating

quality. Had Shakespeare possessed such a voice he would have been famous as an actor. Without it all his other gifts were as nothing on the stage. Had he seen Garrick, Kemble, or Kean performing in plays not his own he might doubtless have perceived a thousand deficiencies in their conception, and defects in their execution; but had he appeared on the same stage with them, even in plays of his own, the audiences would have seen the wide gulf between conception and presentation. One lurid look, one pathetic intonation, would have more power in swaying the emotions of the audience than all the subtle and profound passion which agitated the soul of the poet but did not manifestly express itself: the look and the tone may come from a man so drunk as to be scarcely able to stand; but the public sees only the look, hears only the tone, and is irresistibly moved by these intelligible symbols."

A little earlier in this same suggestive discussion of "Shakespeare as an Actor and Critic," Lewes asserted that

"Shakespeare doubtless knew—none knew so well—how Hamlet, Othello, Richard, and Falstaff should be personated; but had he been called upon to personate them he would have found himself wanting in voice, face, and temperament. The delicate sensitiveness of his organization, which is implied in the exquisiteness and flexibility of his genius, would absolutely have unfitted him for the presentation of characters demanding a robust vigor and a weighty animalism. It is a vain attempt to paint frescos with a camel's-hair brush. The broad and massive effects necessary to scenic presentation could never have been produced by such a temperament as his."

Probably it was because Shakespeare had the delicate sensitiveness with which Lewes credited him that he had also a distaste for acting—if we may interpret any of the lines of his sonnets as lyric revelations of his own sentiment. The intrigue which we think we can disentangle by a minute analysis of these poems may be feigned and unreal, a mere compliance with a literary fashion of the moment; but there is a sincerer note of personal feeling in the sonnets in which Shakespeare seems to be expressing his dislike for the calling by which he made his living. In the hundred-and-tenth sonnet he confessed:

"Alas, 'tis true I have gone here and there
And made myself a motley to the view."

And in the hundred-and-eleventh, which links itself logically with its predecessor, he appealed for a more tolerant consideration of his character contaminated by the stage:

“O, for my sake do you with Fortune chide,
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not for my life provide
Than public means what public manners breeds.
Thence comes it that my nature receives a brand;
And almost thence my nature is subdued
To what it works in, like the dyer’s hand:
Pity me then and wish I were renew’d.”

If Shakespeare is here speaking of himself as an actor, if this lyric is really wrung from the bottom of his heart, then we have an ample explanation for his failure to attain to the higher summits of the histrionic art. He did not like his profession; he did not enjoy acting; and we may take it as certain that no man ever won to the front in a calling which he did not love, just as no man ever despised the art in which he excelled. Shakespeare’s dislike of acting may have been the cause of his lack of mastery or it may have been the consequence of this. Of course, it is dimly possible that we are reading into these sonnets more than Shakespeare meant to put into them, and that the quoted lines do not represent his own feelings. And even if they do, they may voice what was only a fleeting disgust for that personal exhibition which is the inseparable condition of acting and from which the practitioners of all the other arts (except oratory) are exempt—a personal exhibition doubly disagreeable to a poet of Shakespeare’s “delicate sensitiveness.”

Perhaps it is not fanciful to find in “As You Like It” itself evidence in behalf of the contention that Shakespeare was not greatly interested in himself as an actor. Adam, who is a character of some importance in the first half of the comedy, most unexpectedly disappears out of it in the second half. Now, if the author had been anxious for ampler histrionic opportunity, it would not have been difficult for him to bring on Adam again toward the end of the play, that he might impress himself more securely on the memory of the audience.

It was probably in 1598 that Shakespeare first appeared as Adam and as the elder Knowell, and it was probably in 1602 that he first personated the Ghost, being then thirty-eight years old. He was to remain on the stage ten or twelve years longer; but there is no reason to suppose that the parts he played in later life were any more important.

We do not know what characters he undertook in the plays which he wrote after "Hamlet"; nor do we know what parts he assumed in the many pieces by other authors which made up the repertory of the company. That he continued to act we need not doubt; for instance, he was one of the performers in Ben Jonson's "Sejanus," probably produced in 1602 or 1603. But the absence of specific information on this point is evidence that he did not impress himself upon his contemporaries as an actor of power. As Lewes declared, "the mere fact that we hear nothing of his qualities as an actor implies that there was nothing above the line, nothing memorable to be spoken of." The parts which we believe him to have played did not "demand or admit various excellencies." Shakespeare may have had lofty histrionic ambitions, but probably he was not allowed to gratify his longings, and certainly we have no tradition or hint that he ever failed in what he attempted in the theater. Perhaps we are justified in believing that he had gone on the stage merely as the easiest means of immediately earning his living, that he did not greatly care for acting, and that he was satisfied to assume the responsible but subordinate parts for which he was best fitted.

This view of his capacity as an actor is sustained by another consideration. Whatever Shakespeare's position as a performer may have been, his later popularity as a playwright is beyond dispute; indeed, his appeal to the play-going public was so potent that it tempted more than one unscrupulous publisher to put Shakespeare's name to plays which were not his. And his position as a member of the company was equally solidly established. All his plays (with one possible and unimportant exception) had been written for this company, to which he had been early admitted and of which he soon became one of the managers who had the responsibilities and who shared the profits of the enterprise. He ranked high in the company, and when King James took it under his direct patronage shortly after his accession in 1603, Shakespeare's name is the second on the list of actors as it appears on the royal warrant, and Burbage's is third. There is ample evidence that he was held in high esteem by his comrades of the theater. That he had a warm regard for them is shown by the fact that in his will he left money to Burbage, Condell, and Heming for the purchase of memorial rings. That they cherished

his memory is proved by the publication (seven years after his death) of the folio edition of his complete plays, due to the pious care of Condell and Heming. Shakespeare had the gift of friendship and he bound his fellows to him with hooks of steel. Outside of the theater also he was widely liked; and the personal references to him which have been gleaned from contemporary writers, however inadequate they may seem to us nowadays in appreciation of his genius, are abundant in expressions of regard for the man for his gentleness and his courtesy.

Now if Shakespeare was popular with his fellow-actors, with the playgoing public, with those he met outside the theater, there is no other possible explanation of the fact that he did not take the chief parts in at least a few of his own plays except that he was either incapable of so doing or not desirous of attempting it. We have only to consider the history of the theater to discover that every actor-playwright, from Molière to Boucicault and Gillette, who had both ambition and ability, composed the central characters of his own plays for his own acting. This is what has happened always in the past, and it is what must happen whenever a gifted actor takes to writing or whenever a gifted writer takes to acting. If, therefore, Shakespeare did not himself undertake Richard III. or Hamlet or Lear or any other of those overwhelming parts, but devised them rather for the acting of Burbage, we are forced to the conclusion that he knew himself incapable of them and that his comrades in the theater, his fellow-managers, knew this also. In other words, Shakespeare appeared as Adam and as the Ghost and he confined his acting to "old men," because these parts were well within his physical limitations. This conclusion, that the greatest of dramatists was not also great as an actor, may be unwelcome, but there is no escape from it.

For Shakespeare himself, however, if not for his modern admirers, there was one obvious compensation. He may not have been fond of the art; he may even have disliked the practice of his profession, and he may not have revealed himself as a performer of more than respectable ability, but he owed to acting the solid foundation of his fortune. He went to London in his youth with no visible means of support, although already burdened with a wife and three children; and he went back to Stratford not only well-to-do

but probably better off than any other resident of the little town. Even if Shakespeare was not a great actor, it was not as an actor that he gained entrance into the theater, that he acquired that intimate familiarity with stage technique which is evident in his masterpieces, and that he was able to get his successive plays swiftly produced by the very actors for whose performance he had specially devised them. It is because he was an actor that he was able speedily to make his way as a playwright; and it was because he was valuable to the company as actor and playwright that he was admitted partner in the undertaking. If he had not become an actor, he might or he might not have written "Hamlet" and "Julius Cæsar" and "As You Like It," but he probably would never have been able to buy New Place, to get a grant of arms for his father, and to spend the final years of his life in easy leisure. And we may rest assured that Shakespeare himself recognized all the advantage it was to him to be an actor, even if he did affect in one or another of his sonnets to rail against the disadvantages. Great poet as he was, he was also a good man of business with a keen eye to the main chance.

Shakespeare had three sources of income—as an actor, as an author, and as one of the managers. Mr. Lee has calculated that in the earlier years of Shakespeare's connection with the theater he received at least a hundred pounds a year as a performer and at least twenty pounds more as a playwright, with possibly some slight additional income from the sale of his poems (which were repeatedly reprinted). Allowing for the greater purchasing power of money in those days, we may assume that this gave Shakespeare an annual income about equivalent to five thousand dollars to-day. Later the price paid for plays rose, and by that time Shakespeare had become one of the partners in the theater. There is a likelihood that Shakespeare took upon himself a portion of the labor of stage-management and of producing new plays; and although the customs of the Elizabethan theater made this task less burdensome than it is to-day, still it was worthy of some remuneration. That Shakespeare in his youth had gone on the stage as an actor proved to be as profitable to his pocket as it was helpful to his mastery of stagecraft.

BRANDER MATTHEWS.